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SUBJECT: FOREIGN JOURNALISTS TEST CHINA'S RELAXED MEDIA
RULES WITH MIXED RESULTS

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Classified By: Politcal Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Foreign journalists have had mixed results in testing China's newly relaxed travel and interview rules (reftel). Several dissidents and controversial figures have given interviews to foreign media outlets with no official interference or repercussions, our contacts told us. Nonetheless, officials prevented reporters from meeting with Shanghai-based lawyer Zheng Enchong shortly after the new year. A key reckoning will come the next time a violent protest flares and grabs the attention of the international press, Chinese and foreign journalists said. The relaxed restrictions have not translated into more openness for China's own journalists, who remain keen to avoid arousing the censors' sensitivities. Domestic media has presented predictably positive coverage of the policy's rollout, about which Propaganda authorities have issued no specific coverage guidelines, contacts told us. End Summary.

A Welcome Relaxation

¶2. (C) The Foreign Ministry announced State Council order No. 477 on December 1 (reftel), specifying that foreign journalists will not need permission from provincial foreign affairs offices to conduct news gathering activities in China during the period surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics, from January 1, 2007 to October 17, 2008. Our foreign media contacts told us the previous regulations, adopted in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, had become largely irrelevant because reporters found ways around them and enforcement was inconsistent in any case. Nevertheless, reporters we spoke with were upbeat about the relaxation, remarking that local officials can no longer dust off the old rules and use them to justify detentions or harassment. "This is a positive step," said Associated Press Beijing Bureau Chief Charles Hutzler.

¶3. (C) Hutzler and other reporters told us that the real question is whether the dissidents and controversial figures they interview will suffer official retribution because of their contacts with foreign media. Contacts we spoke to said they are unaware of any negative repercussions to their interviewees and that some of the subjects themselves continue to talk to the press. Activist Hu Jia, who is under house arrest, has been granting phone

interviews since the new year. On January 12 he told poloff he has spoken with several foreign outlets about the appeal decision upholding the original verdict in the highly sensitive Chen Guangcheng case (septel). Li Jinsong, a rights lawyer, also told us he has spoken with the overseas press with no official fallout. One positive result of the new rules is that "it has emboldened dissidents to speak more freely with us," said Benjamin Lim, a Reuters correspondent who interviewed former Zhao Ziyang aide Bao Tong, also under house arrest, on January 1.

Key Test: Social Unrest

14. (C) Lim added, however, that it is too early to judge how consistently the rules will be applied. For example, he related that officials prevented Reuters reporters from meeting with Shanghai rights lawyer Zheng Enchong just after the new year. Like Hu and Bao, Zheng is under house arrest and has the additional sentence of being "deprived of political rights" for one year, which raises questions about whether the Government will use such legal loopholes to limit sensitive contacts. Another bellwether will be how officials react to foreign media attempts to cover a number of upcoming sensitive anniversaries, Lim said. January 17 will mark two years since the death of Zhao Ziyang, he specified, adding that many in the foreign media corps intend to go to the former leader's house on that date to attempt to interview family members.

15. (C) At the same time, Chinese and foreign

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journalists we spoke with all agree that the acid test for the relaxation will be how local officials respond to foreign media interest (and presence) when an incident of unrest flares in their area. "The problems we face are usually with security personnel who do not tend to care what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs says," Hutzler of the AP said. The MFA and the State Council Information Office can disseminate all the new rules they like, he added, but the question is, will the message get to the right people? (Note: The State Council order was mum on the subject of covering social unrest and MFA spokesman Liu Jianchao was ambiguous on the subject at the December 1 press conference, saying only that "local officials may restrict foreign reporters' news gathering in cases where there are disturbances of public order or emergencies." End note.)

No Relief for Chinese Journalists

16. (C) The easing has had no appreciable effect for Chinese journalists, said Wang Feng (protect), an editor and writer at the influential bi-weekly Caijing Magazine. As ever, media content that crosses censors' red lines can land journalists and editors in trouble. He assessed that the relaxed rules are little more than a public relations tool designed to boost China's international image in the run-up to the Games in 2008. At the same time, he speculated that the increased openness could benefit Chinese reporters by giving them some cover when traveling to areas of simmering unrest. Security officials will be less likely to arrest or abuse local journalists in the presence of a CNN camera, Wang theorized. Li Tao (protect), a professor at the Tsinghua University School of Journalism and Communications, separately made a similar point, although he added that most reporters he has spoken with believe the relaxation has "nothing to do with them." Li said the Order is a

good sign overall and reflects confidence on the part of Central authorities.

17. (C) Chinese media reporting on the State Council Order has been straightforward and upbeat. The English-language China Daily newspaper and website, whose readership is primarily foreign, have predictably provided ample coverage. Local newspapers and magazines have also run articles and the Xinhua News Service listed the relaxation as one of the "top 10 media stories of 2006" in a roundup on January 10. The Sina.com news portal published an interesting article on the subject on January 1, recounting the "positive" experiences of Lim of Reuters in securing interviews. The piece quoted a People's Daily reporter as saying that the influx of overseas press will pose a challenge because the different working styles of foreign and Chinese journalists "will make me feel more pressure."

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